



MAIN PICTURE: Rayana (left) and Ferial Ameerodien are both champion kickboxers. **BELOW LEFT:** The sisters in training. **ABOVE:** Rayana coaches kids from Imizamo Yethu in Hout Bay near Cape Town. **BELOW:** The beautiful sisters have done modelling too.

to teach children across South Africa to use Muay Thai to defend themselves.

Muay Thai, the national sport of Thailand, is similar to kickboxing as it's also a full-contact combat sport. But unlike kickboxing, which allows only the use of fists and feet, participants may also use knees and elbows as weapons.

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RAYANA decided to learn how to box to gain confidence after a hurtful experience when she was 15.

"Someone called me a loser," she says. "I don't think that person realised the impact it had on me. Now I appreciate the positive in it: it made me the determined person I am."

Another reason was improved fitness. "I wanted



'It helped me gain confidence and become more assertive'

But it wasn't easy at first for Rayana to follow her dream. Her dad didn't want her to box and for months she tried to keep her fighting to herself. "For the first year it was basically a secret from my dad. But when he realised what was going into it he came around."

Their parents couldn't have been too surprised though. "Both our grandfathers were boxers – it's in our blood!" Their parents are also sporty and met on the ice. Their mom was a figure skater and dad an ice hockey player.

Under Rayana's guidance Ferial followed in her footsteps five years ago and won gold medals at the Western Cape and South African Muay Thai championships in her first year.

Initially she wasn't interested in the sport but she began to see a new side to her sister's passion after Rayana opened the training academy in 2000. "When I saw her training

to lose weight and tone up. But I got so much more out of it. I was very shy before I started fighting. It helped me gain a lot of confidence and I became much more assertive."

She took up boxing in 1995 and soon after that her love affair with kickboxing began.

"I was working part-time at a gym when I met former world heavyweight kickboxing champion Mike Bernardo," she says. They became friends and started training together.

She was the only woman training with professional male boxers and quickly discovered a knack for Muay Thai. Her first professional fight was in 1997 and in 1998 she became SA Thai Boxing ladies bantamweight champion.

someone and saw that girl fight it was different. When it's your sister you don't want to see her get hurt."

Ferial also experienced a confidence boost when she hit the ring. "I used to be very self-conscious. I was so skinny I wore T-shirts on the beach to hide my body. Now I don't mind showing off a bit more."

For both women the chance to change perceptions of tough sports-women proved irresistible. "We enjoy the contrast," Rayana says. "People wouldn't associate us with this sport. We kick and spar in gym but we love to get dressed up and go dancing too. So yes, we love fighting but we also love getting made up. It's nice to catch people off-guard."

Since starting her kickboxing academy Rayana has trained more than 400 people. She's particularly pleased 60 per cent of her clients are women and is excited about the future of Muay Thai in South Africa. She's set her sights on winning a world title and plans to expose more people to Thai kickboxing through the Kickboxing for Kids programme.

Ferial is training and fighting in Europe but will return to South Africa soon. "I'm currently teaching a group of children in Dublin and look forward to sharing the skills I've gained with South African children. I look forward to making a positive contribution to the sad situation regarding violence and abuse against children," she says.

Ferial's boyfriend is very supportive of her fighting while Rayana is still looking for Mr Right. "Some guys feel intimidated by strong women," she says. That's why both sisters are attracted to guys who can deal with their champion status.

Rayana believes kickboxing can change lives through its confidence-boosting powers. Her favourite story is of an 82-year-old woman who came to her gym and said, "I was mugged. I want to do something about it . . . please teach me to box."

"I gave her a few lessons and she was happy," Rayana says with a smile. "And that's the most rewarding part of what we do."

■ **For more info on kickboxing training and the Kickboxing for Kids programme go to www.rays-kickboxing.com.** □